

The Sword of Korisios*

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DURING the reorganization of the prehistoric section of the Bern Historical Museum a chance discovery was made by the writer of the present article. While a fragment of a La Tène sword (without inventory number) was being treated, it was suspected that a punch-mark might be concealed beneath the scabbard, which was rusted on to the sword. The rusty remains were removed, so that the blade could be examined in an oblique light. Most surprisingly there was revealed not only what subsequently proved to be a well preserved punch-mark but also, beside it, a Greek inscription! After taking a photograph of it in its original state the remains of the scabbard were removed, and a single letter of the inscription that was covered by rust was cleaned (PLATE VIII, B, C).

In order to discover the provenance of this extraordinary find all the Museum's La Tène swords were examined with respect to their typology and find-spots. By a remarkable piece of good fortune the lower part of the blade belonging to our fragment was recovered (Inventory number 19035). According to our catalogue this well-preserved sword-blade was found, during the rectification of the Jura waterways (1868–75) in the Nidau-Büren canal, and this is confirmed by a published drawing and description. As will be seen the sword was found, unless we are much mistaken, at Port. When found it was bent almost at a right angle, as the broken edges showed. Unfortunately it was forcibly straightened, probably by the finder, who was probably not aware of the special significance of bent swords, and thus the blade was broken in half.

The overall length of the sword is 96 cm. and its maximum width 5.4 cm., ending in a short point. It has a sharply defined midrib ending in a flat-hammered tang. Parallel to the midrib run two wide grooves (Blutrinnen), with narrow grooves on each side. As often happens, the edges have been welded on to the sword, which was probably made with the usual damascening technique. It is a cutting weapon of a Late La Tène type, representing considerable technical accomplishment. Below the guard can be seen an oval punch-mark which has been stamped into the red-hot iron with such force that the outline is faintly visible even on the other side of the blade. Stamped below the punch-mark can be seen the word KORISIOS, written in Greek letters. The punch-mark shows a palm-tree symmetrically flanked by two horned animals rampant, probably capricorns, eating from the tree. This heraldic design can be traced back to an oriental prototype, and was probably derived from an ancient classical intaglio; whereas the commoner punch-marks, mostly of star-signs or animals such as bulls or boars, seem to be derived from Celtic, or perhaps even Greek, coins.

It is well known that Celtic swords represent a unique achievement and a high point in the old art of sword-making, and the employment of a punch-mark must be regarded in the light of this fact. No doubt a famous sword-smith enjoyed a high repute amongst the warlike Celtic peoples, who liked to be able to distinguish his products from those having no punch-marks. This is clear from the fact that punch-marked swords

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are always above the average in quality. The maker of our inscribed sword must surely have been one of the outstanding Celtic armourers of the region, as the selection of so artistic a punch-mark shows; that is shown even more clearly by the addition of his name in Greek letters—always provided that we are correct in interpreting the punch-marks as protective symbols or trade-marks, rather than as owners' marks. The choice of motives for the punch-marks is unlikely to have been fortuitous. We may suppose that the horns of these two capricorns were thought to give a protection against black magic; and that their position beside the Tree of Life, was a magic symbol of defence and also of the life-power of the owner of the weapon.

If that conjectural interpretation is correct, the punch-mark on another sword from Port, showing a cow or bull lying on the ground, assumes a special significance (PLATE VIII, A). A water course flowing through the Lakeland is said to have been called Kuhfluss (Cow River) in Celtic times; and a ring from Port, already published several times, has a design of bull's horns and waterfowl. These facts suggest a bull cult in the region. Perhaps the symbol of the river-god as a bull stamped on the sword endowed the owner, by means of a magical process, with special power.

The mental attitude revealed by the symbols may help to explain the dedication of the sword to the dead warrior after it had been made valueless by bending. The ritual custom of bending swords, and even of folding them up several times, caused Polybius and Plutarch to assert that these swords were useless even after the first cut unless the warrior could unbend them quickly.

The sword of Korisios is one of these ritually bent blades (with remains of the scabbard!); it seems to have come, not from a grave but from the bed of an old river, and we may suppose that it was an offering to the river-god. In this connection it is important to mention the latest interpretation of the famous site of La Tène itself, at the lower end of Lake Neuchâtel, and of Port, at the lower end of Lake Biel, as being Celtic places of sacrificial offerings. Though both sites have yielded remains of piles, there are no remains of habitations. On the other hand there are many finds, mostly of weapons—from La Tène no less than 166 swords (mostly in their scabbards) and 270 spear-heads. Most of the swords from La Tène belong to the Middle La Tène period, whereas most of those from Port belong to La Tène III and include a type which seems to be characteristic of Port, namely, that to which the Korisios sword belongs. Our inscribed sword is probably, therefore, if we accept K. L. Raddatz's convincing interpretation, one of the weapon-offerings discovered in an old river-bed during the rectification of the 19th century. The large number of swords, probably offerings to a bull-shaped river-god, are many of them of the highest quality, which may at first thought, appear surprising. But we know that the Celtic peoples were fond of making offerings, and that they did occasionally make human sacrifices; so it may not be without significance that, amongst the hundreds of weapons found at La Tène, some human skeletons and skulls also have turned up. It should be recorded, too, that an old report speaks of the finding of a skeleton with a noose of hemp round its neck—an occurrence hitherto recorded only in Northern Europe.

NOTE.—Dr Wyss cites examples of the name Corisius occurring in a dedication inscription (*CIL*, IX, no. 2828), Corisia as a girl's name on a tombstone (*CIL* v, no. 7184), and Corisio as a potter's name (*CIL*, VII, no. 10010/646). Corio- is a Celtic word meaning war host, war assembly. We might add that the word is found in some Romano-British place-names in the north, and that it may have been an element in the certainly corrupt name of Corbridge, Corstopitum; an emendation to Corioritum or Corisoritum is here suggested, where the second element is the Celtic word for 'ford.'—EDITOR.